

## Book Review

### LOST TRIUMPH: LEE'S REAL PLAN AT GETTYSBURG—AND WHY IT FAILED<sup>1</sup>

REVIEWED BY MAJOR JASON M. BELL<sup>2</sup>

*[General Lee] said in a voice tremulous with emotion: "I never saw troops behave more magnificently than Pickett's division of Virginians did to-day [sic] in that grand charge upon the enemy. And if they had been supported as they were to have been—but for some reason not yet explained to me, were not—we would have held the position and the day would have been ours." After a moment's pause he added in a loud voice, in a tone almost of agony, "Too bad! Too bad! OH! TOO BAD!"*<sup>3</sup>

What was the expected support of which Confederate General Robert E. Lee spoke?<sup>4</sup> In *Lost Triumph*, Tom Carhart assaults the conventional wisdom surrounding Gettysburg and deconstructs the view that Confederate General George E. Pickett's tragic charge on day three of the battle was the sum total of Lee's tactical plan.<sup>5</sup> Carhart examines whether Lee foolishly threw Pickett's men to their death in a frontal assault of Union cannon on Cemetery Ridge or whether Lee had a more complex battle plan.<sup>6</sup> Was the horrific loss of life all Lee's fault? No, Carhart tells us, because General J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry failed to achieve a Napoleonic penetration, a *manoeuvre sur les derrières* (maneuver on the hindquarters), into the Union rear at Culp's Hill and Cemetery Ridge.<sup>7</sup>

Although not an entirely novel theory, Carhart's reasoned analysis provides insight into Lee's Gettysburg strategy on the third day of the battle.<sup>8</sup> Along the way, Carhart uncovers further revelations about General Stuart and the Union's infamous General George Custer. Carhart's new research and intuitive interpretation of reports, first hand accounts, and subsequent histories reveal a new understanding of Gettysburg. Compelling from the start, *Lost Triumph* not only breathes new life into familiar names but also demonstrates just how close the Confederate Army came to victory at Gettysburg.<sup>9</sup>

#### I. History as Precedent

*Lost Triumph* opens with an examination of Robert E. Lee, the Soldier. Through Carhart, himself a West Point graduate and Vietnam veteran,<sup>10</sup> the reader learns that Lee graduated second in the West Point class of 1829. Lee showed early prowess as a Soldier in Mexico. Serving as an engineer on General Winfield Scott's staff, Captain Lee's courageous reconnaissance up the Cerro Gordo Heights uncovered Santa Anna's flank and led to a U.S. victory over the Mexicans.<sup>11</sup> During the pre-Civil War years, Lee returned to West Point in 1852 to serve as Superintendent.<sup>12</sup> Carhart notes approvingly

<sup>1</sup> TOM CARHART, *LOST TRIUMPH: LEE'S REAL PLAN AT GETTYSBURG—AND WHY IT FAILED* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Army. Written while assigned as a student, 54th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

<sup>3</sup> CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 260-261 (quoting GENERAL JOHN D. IMBODEN, *THE CONFEDERATE RETREAT FROM GETTYSBURG, reprinted in 3 BATTLES AND LEADERS OF THE CIVIL WAR* 421 (Robert U. Johnson & Clarence C. Buel eds., Book Sales 2000) (1887)). General Robert E. Lee, Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, C.S.A., spoke these words to Cavalry Brigade Commander General John Imboden during a brief meeting in the early hours of 4 July 1863 near the crossroads of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. *Id.* at 260. General Imboden served under General Lee but did not participate in the climactic battle of Gettysburg, which spanned the first three days of July 1863. *Id.* at 261. Normally reticent, General Lee is not often remembered for such dramatic episodes.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *See id.* at 2. Carhart cites no authority discussing this commonly accepted view.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 240.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 23 (acknowledging that other historians have speculated, without supporting evidence, that Stuart sought Meade's rear position).

<sup>9</sup> For Southern apologists, see generally NEWT GINGRICH & WILLIAM FORSTCHEN, *GETTYSBURG, A NOVEL OF THE CIVIL WAR* (2003) (imagining a Confederate victory at Gettysburg).

<sup>10</sup> CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 9. Carhart is a twice wounded Vietnam veteran and member of the West Point Class of 1966. *See generally* RICK ATKINSON, *THE LONG GRAY LINE: THE AMERICAN JOURNEY OF WEST POINT'S CLASS OF 1966* (1989).

<sup>11</sup> CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 7-9.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 29.

that Lee, both as the Superintendent and as a cadet, was a student of the military art and the “Great Captains,” particularly Napoleon.<sup>13</sup> As Superintendent, Lee supported the military instruction of cadets through the study of Napoleon’s campaigns.<sup>14</sup>

Carhart next examines several renowned military engagements. His purpose is not simply a historiographic detour. Instead, Carhart seeks an understanding of Lee’s mind to understand what objectives and tactics he might have pursued at Gettysburg.<sup>15</sup> Carhart examines the actions of several notable commanders—Hannibal at Cannae, King Frederick at Leuthen, and Napoleon at Austerlitz.<sup>16</sup> After cursory discussion, Carhart then spends a chapter discussing Napoleonic tactics, including the *manoeuvre sur les derrières* where Napoleon sent his reserve into the enemy rear area by way of a flanking attack.<sup>17</sup> Simplistic in conception, Napoleon deftly used this tactic to rip through a weakened enemy and topple the European powers arrayed against him.<sup>18</sup> Carhart leads the reader to believe that Lee would also move for the enemy’s rear when seeking a decisive victory in battle.

Lee’s quest for knowledge and subsequent application of the art of war and its principles is like the role of *stare decisis*—the role of precedent—in the American legal system.<sup>19</sup> Battles, like decisions from the highest court in a jurisdiction, serve as base points from which leaders cull tactics and principles.<sup>20</sup> Commanders then apply these principles of war in other battles and campaigns.<sup>21</sup> The principles of war, like caselaw, inform the commander’s understanding of how to wage war. As Carhart aptly concludes, the battles of Cannae, Leuthen, and Austerlitz contained important lessons that Lee employed at Gettysburg.

## II. Gettysburg

The climatic Civil War battle around the hamlet of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania spanned over the first three days of July 1863.<sup>22</sup> The green, pastoral fields that today mark the site belie the ferocious struggle that raged over the now hallowed ground of Little Round Top, the Peach Orchard, and Cemetery Ridge. By 5 July, Lee slipped his battered Army south, and a befuddled Union General George C. Meade found himself in control of the field with his Army of the Potomac largely intact.<sup>23</sup> Such an outcome was hardly expected. Lee had out-generaled Union forces since his assumption of command in 1862 but the untested Meade defeated Lee.<sup>24</sup> The South failed to achieve the decisive victory for which Lee yearned and the South desperately needed.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 29-34.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* Carhart paints a picture of Lee as a student of the military art seeking the principles of war much like an engineer might pursue an understanding of static forces on a structure. Other notable military leaders, such as Ulysses S. Grant, neither pursued the study of war nor believed there was value in so doing. See generally AMERICAN MILITARY HISTORY 265 (Maurice Matloff et al. eds., 1988).

<sup>16</sup> CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 41-54. Each of these battles is described in Antoine Henri Jomini’s classic military text on strategy *Précis de l’Art de la Guerre*, which was published in 1838 and taught at West Point since 1853. CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 35.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 66.

<sup>18</sup> See RUSSELL F. WEIGLEY, THE AGE OF BATTLES: THE QUEST FOR DECISIVE WARFARE FROM BREITENFELD TO WATERLOO 386 (1991) (discussing the *manoeuvre sur les derrières* at Austerlitz).

<sup>19</sup> *Stare decisis* is Latin for “to stand by things decided.” It is “[t]he doctrine of precedent, under which it is necessary for a court to follow earlier judicial decisions when the same points arise again in litigation.” BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY 790 (7th ed. 1999).

<sup>20</sup> See generally STEVEN J. BURTON, AN INTRODUCTION TO LAW AND LEGAL REASONING 28-29 (1985).

<sup>21</sup> This is not to imply that battlefield principle applies in a lockstep formulaic manner. A battle is fought just as a case is decided, based on its own unique facts and circumstances. Furthermore, military principles, like prior controlling legal decisions, often provide no clear answers to the situation at hand.

<sup>22</sup> CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 123. See generally CARL SMITH, GETTYSBURG 1863: HIGH TIDE OF THE CONFEDERACY (1998).

<sup>23</sup> CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 4. Meade assumed command of the Army of the Potomac on 28 June, only days prior to the battle of Gettysburg. *Id.* at 117.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* Prior to the Civil War, Lee was widely regarded as the finest officer in the Union Army. Indeed, at the outbreak of hostilities, President Abraham Lincoln offered Lee command of the Union Army. Lee turned down the offer, resigned his commission, and returned to his native Virginia. *Id.* at 70.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 107. Lee mounted an offensive into the North to destroy the Union Army, bring the North to the peace table, and gain support from Europe. He realized that the South could not win a prolonged battle against the resource and manpower rich North. *Id.*

Prior to the battle of Gettysburg, the North's stamina for war waned following their bitter defeat at Chancellorsville, but the South still faced the North's vast material resources.<sup>26</sup> Lee realized the cure for both ills was the total destruction of the Union Army and launched his second offensive into the North. Beginning on 23 June, Stuart wreaked havoc once again to the east of Gettysburg by conducting a reconnaissance foray around the Army of the Potomac.<sup>27</sup> On 1 July, just north of Gettysburg, Meade's cavalry under the command of Union General Don Carlos Buell, made contact with lead elements of Lee's III Corps commanded by General A.P. Hill.<sup>28</sup> It was an encounter of more happenstance than strategic foresight. During fierce action on the first of July, the Confederate Army made modest gains that drove the Union forces into a defensive line along Cemetery Ridge.<sup>29</sup> That evening Lee met with Confederate General James Longstreet and ordered him to attack on 2 July, over the latter's protestations.<sup>30</sup>

In describing the events of 2 July, Carhart takes pains to describe Stuart's return to Lee's headquarters at Seminary Ridge. Through an examination of the record, Carhart concludes that Lee was not disaffected with Stuart, as is commonly accepted, but is only speculation.<sup>31</sup> Carhart argues that Lee ordered Stuart to take his cavalry and conduct a *manoeuvre sur les derrières* into the Union rear via the Baltimore Pike.<sup>32</sup> Having set forth Lee's Napoleonic credentials, Carhart explains that Stuart's mission had to be a penetration of the Union rear and not simply flank security for Lee's left wing.<sup>33</sup>

Carhart makes several compelling arguments to substantiate Stuart's mission and objective on 3 July. First, Union cavalrymen spotted Confederate scouts conducting reconnaissance to the east beyond the Confederate left wing.<sup>34</sup> Second, there is no doctrinal justification for Stuart's large cavalry force to have been placed nearly two miles east of the Confederate left wing.<sup>35</sup> Carhart also supports his argument with other writings, concluding that the only logical explanation is that Stuart was conducting reconnaissance for a flanking attack on the third day of the battle.<sup>36</sup> The pieces in place, Carhart identifies three prongs to Lee's day-three battle plan—Longstreet's heavy attacks on the Union left wing, including Pickett's charge; Confederate General Richard "Baldy" Ewell's renewed attack on the Union right wing at Culp's Hill; and Stuart's cavalry force attacks into the Union rear.<sup>37</sup> Although the evidence for Lee's scheme of maneuver previously existed, Carhart's *Lost Triumph* sheds new light on Lee's ultimate purpose.<sup>38</sup> So why wasn't Lee successful?

Lee's plan, in line with Napoleonic tactics, involved coordinated attacks on the Union lines.<sup>39</sup> But war is an inherently disjointed endeavor. *Lost Triumph* details a series of miscues that forced Lee to modify his plan of attack, yet still rely on Stuart's attack from the east cavalry field into the enemy's rear on Cemetery Hill.<sup>40</sup> To coordinate the attack, four prearranged cannon shots from Stuart told Lee the route into the Union rear was clear.<sup>41</sup> Only after giving the signal did Stuart realize he had a large Union cavalry force to his south, commanded by Union General David Gregg, who had been

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<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 107, 142.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 141.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 123.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 124.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 124-26.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 142.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 148.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 148-50.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 146.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 150.

<sup>36</sup> *See, e.g., id.* at 249.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 163.

<sup>38</sup> *See id.* (noting that Lee's order to Stuart is in the OFFICIAL RECORDS, *infra* note 53).

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 181.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 164-85.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 205.

alerted to Stuart's intentions.<sup>42</sup> The ensuing fight was fierce as Stuart attempted to drive his cavalry force through Gregg's troops and into the Union rear.<sup>43</sup>

Carhart describes the ensuing battle in vivid detail. Numerically superior, the Confederate cavalry, some 4000 strong, formed in column and surged south to break through the Union force opposed at one point by only 400 cavalymen led by Union General George A. Custer.<sup>44</sup> Custer rallied his Michigan cavalry with the fierce cry, "Come on, you Wolverines!" and charged headlong into the superior force.<sup>45</sup> Combining tactical audacity with sheer bravado, Custer put his men into line and subsequently disrupted the Confederate attack causing them to break ranks.<sup>46</sup> Once broken, the two forces engaged in fierce, close quarters battles. This singular act of courage by Custer prevented Stuart's *manoeuvre sur les derrières* and any hope for a decisive Confederate victory.

The Battle of Gettysburg is widely accepted as the "high-water mark" of the Confederacy's secessionary struggle and a failure in Lee's portfolio of otherwise superb generalship.<sup>47</sup> The battle on 3 July climaxed with Stuart's *manoeuvre sur les derrières* failing because of Custer's fierce resistance and General Pickett's division of 13,000 Confederates being crippled by attacking across a mile-long stretch of open field into the teeth of Union artillery.<sup>48</sup> General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia found herself bloodily repulsed.<sup>49</sup> On the morning of 4 July, the country awoke to the growing realization that Gettysburg was a massive defeat for the South.<sup>50</sup> But for the heroic acts of Custer, the reader is left with the tantalizing thought that if Stuart had successfully reached Cemetery Hill, Pickett's charge might have carried the day.

### III. Conclusion

Carhart's *Lost Triumph* forges a new and more complex understanding of Lee's battle plan at Gettysburg, of Lee as a commander, and of Custer's officership. Carhart provides convincing evidence that Stuart's real mission on 3 July was to conduct a flanking attack into the rear of Union forces on Cemetery Ridge and Culp's Hill. Brick by brick, Carhart builds a wall of persuasive argument and makes headway in relieving Lee almost entirely of responsibility for the loss at Gettysburg. Carhart, however, disappoints readers by failing to note the account of Captain William E. Miller of the 3d Pennsylvania Cavalry:

[Stuart's] avowed object was to strike the rear of the Federal army in cooperation with Pickett's grand attack upon its center. For this movement he succeeded in attaining a most commanding position, and, according to the surmise of Major H. B. McClellan, Stuart's adjutant-general, gave to Lee the preconcerted signal for the attack. The field of this cavalry fight was south of the Rummel buildings. To this field Stuart advanced his whole force, engaged in an obstinate and desperate struggle with the Federal cavalry, was driven back out of the field and forced to retire to his original position.<sup>51</sup>

By failing to acknowledge Miller's testimony, Carhart misses a persuasive ally.

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<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 204, 208.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 213-40.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at 210, 235.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 235-36.

<sup>47</sup> James M. McPherson, *Foreword* to *LOST TRIUMPH*, *supra* note 1 at xi. This would be Lee's last offensive into the North.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 1-3.

<sup>49</sup> During Pickett's charge alone, some 6,500 Confederates were cut down in just over more than sixteen minutes. SMITH, *supra* note 22, at 104.

<sup>50</sup> Not only a numerical tragedy, the most significant impact was Lee's inability to remain on the offensive and achieve a decisive victory. "Confederate losses were 4637 killed, 12,391 wounded, and 846 missing or captured. Union losses were 3149 killed, 14,503 wounded, and 5161 missing or wounded." *Id.* at 113.

<sup>51</sup> WILLIAM E. MILLER, CAPTAIN, 3D PA CAVALRY, *THE CAVALRY BATTLE NEAR GETTYSBURG*, reprinted in *3 BATTLES AND LEADERS OF THE CIVIL WAR* 406 (Robert U. Johnson & Clarence C. Buel eds., Book Sales 2000) (1887).

Carhart's comparative methodology in examining the battles of Cannae, Leuthen, and Austerlitz is instructive and powerful. The evidence strongly supports a portrait of Lee as a Napoleonic tactician. Early on, Carhart spends a scant twenty-six pages examining the roots of Lee's Civil War strategy, including passages devoted to the Napoleonic warfare. He later provides more analysis by comparing Lee's attempted *manoeuvre sur les derrières* to Napoleon's actions at Castiglione.<sup>52</sup> *Lost Triumph* ultimately explains why Lee ordered Longstreet's forces, including Pickett's division, against the Union left wing by persuasively revealing the three Napoleonic prongs of Lee's third-day battle plan.

For all its analytical strength, Carhart does not adequately criticize Lee for his shortcomings. For instance, while Napoleon chose the ground where he wanted to engage a numerically superior Allied force at Austerlitz, Carhart fails to comment on why Lee chose to tackle an entrenched Union force on Cemetery Ridge, especially in light of his freedom of maneuver.<sup>53</sup> History's hindsight shows that Lee's decision to stay and fight at Gettysburg was a tragic error. Furthermore, while Carhart's *Lost Triumph* deservedly calls attention to Custer's heroics, it is not clear whether the entire Union victory should be attributed to Custer's actions. These blemishes aside, Carhart supports his thesis with detailed research and useful maps. For example, Carhart explains away the layman's critique that Stuart's flanking mission is not specifically documented in Lee's after-action reports and misleadingly documented in the *Civil War Official Records*.<sup>54</sup> The reader is thus informed that Lee only rarely revealed his battle plans after Appomattox<sup>55</sup> and that Stuart was highly misleading in his written accounts.<sup>56</sup> Carhart's style is both readable and accessible. He provides in-depth coverage of the critical events on the east cavalry field at Gettysburg without losing the reader's attention.

Carhart's *Lost Triumph* signals a profound shift in the common assessment of the Battle of Gettysburg, the decisive engagement of the Civil War, in stature if not military significance. Both students and casual observers will find Carhart's prose highly entertaining and educational. Since military history offers few answers and raises many questions, *Lost Triumph* gets high marks for not sating the reader, but rather increasing the appetite for deeper scrutiny. Members of the military profession have perhaps a more compelling reason to examine *Lost Triumph*. Carhart's study demonstrates that military leaders should study epic battles such as Gettysburg to understand their precedents.<sup>57</sup> Carhart's analysis provides a fresh perspective as to why the tide turned against the Confederate Army in early July 1863. Whether the leader seeks a deeper understanding of Gettysburg or just wants to wile away a Sunday afternoon with a great tale of tragedy and heroism, *Lost Triumph* delivers with force and verve.

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<sup>52</sup> CARHART, *supra* note 1, at 156-58.

<sup>53</sup> *Id.* at 51.

<sup>54</sup> *Id.* at 197-99; 241 (discussing records contained in THE WAR OF THE REBELLION: A COMPILATION OF THE OFFICIAL RECORDS OF THE UNION AND CONFEDERATE ARMIES (Washington: Government Printing Office 1889) [hereinafter OFFICIAL RECORDS]).

<sup>55</sup> *Id.* at 95.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.* at 197-202.

<sup>57</sup> See generally Colonel Thomas E. Gries, *A Perspective on Military History*, in A GUIDE TO THE USE AND STUDY OF MILITARY HISTORY 25 (John E. Jessup, Jr. & Robert W. Coakley eds., Center of Military History, U.S. Army 1979).